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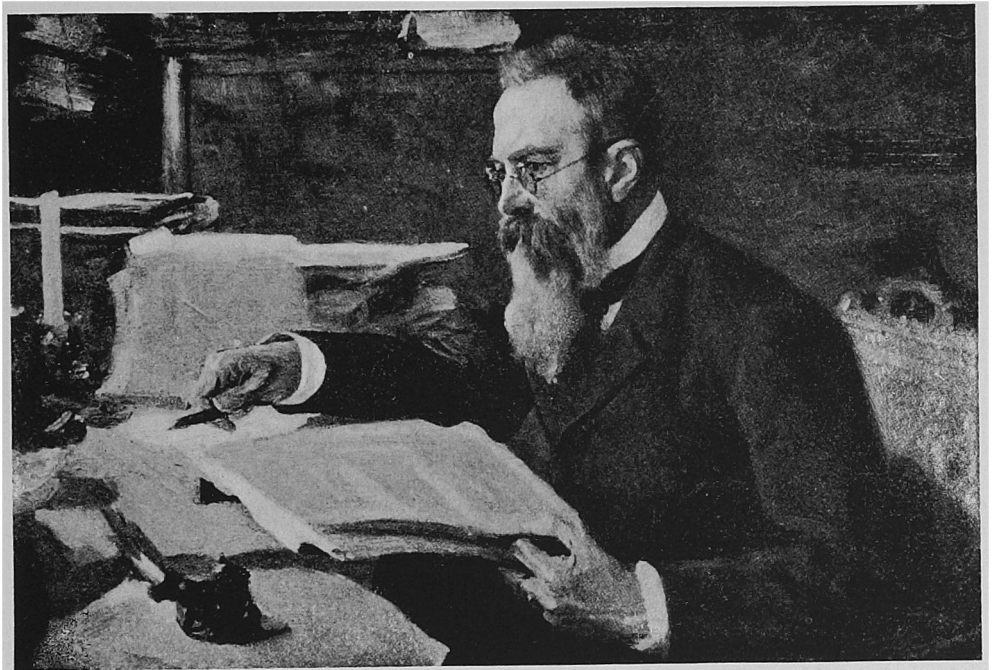
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KING DUODO

In "Le Coq d' Or," from
the costume sketch

—Courtesy of Mr. Edward
Siedle, Technical Director,
Metropolitan Opera House



NICHOLAS ANDREIVITCH RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

One of the most pre-eminent and essentially racially composers of that glorious circle
to which we owe the National School of Music in Russia

From a painting by Repin

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV

LAST OF THE GREAT TRADITIONAL COMPOSERS OF RUSSIA

"Le Coq d'Or," composed by Rimsky-Korsakov to a libretto by V. Bielsky, based upon Poushkin's well-known poem, will be one of the chief offerings of the Metropolitan Opera season. The librettist says in his preface: "The purely human nature of Poushkin's Golden Cock—that instructive tragi-comedy of the unhappy consequences following upon mortal passions and weaknesses—permits us to place the plot in any region and in any period." Thus in spite of the Eastern origin of the tale, and the Italian names, Duodo and Guidone, all that constitutes the historical character of the story recalls the simple customs and daily life of the Russian people, with their crude coloring, their exuberance, and passion for liberty so dear to the artist.

The music is appropriately barbaric, and we feel that in spite of forty years of the composer's development, it is essentially the work of the same temperament which produced the symphonic poems of "Sadko," and the Oriental symphony of "Antar."

MUCH of the present eminence of Russian music is credited to the work and influence of two men, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, who constructed, as one critic has said, "their majestic edifice upon the everlasting foundation laid by Glinka." Aside from the tendency to hyperbole in the phrase, the remark has particular validity as applied to Rimsky-Korsakov, for not only was he peculiarly imbued with the national tradition but in addition he taught and developed a group of distinguished composers—Liadov, Arensky, and others. These, inspired with the same ideals, have added immeasurably to the work of the master in erecting the magnificent temple of Russian art.

And just as Rimsky-Korsakov was the chief of the purely national composers whose influence was thus felt, so he was the last who elected to work with purely native materials and in a purely Russian style. The younger generation is more and more showing the effect of outside influence and exotic sympathy. Rimsky-Korsakov, therefore, stands out in the entire history of Russian opera as one of

the most pre-eminent and essentially racial composers of that glorious circle to which we owe the national school of music in Russia.

Born in 1844 in the village of Tikvin, province of Novgorod, Nicholas Andreivich Rimsky-Korsakov entered the navy at an early age, according to the traditions of his family. While he had all the precocity noticeable in so many musicians, his serious career did not commence until he came under the influence of Balakirev and his friends, although from these he was disassociated from time to time owing to the exigencies of his naval duties.

His first work, a Symphony in E Minor, was written and revised while at sea, and subsequently was performed by Balakirev in 1866 at the Free School of Music. During his early development, Schumann, Berlioz, Liszt and Glinka were his ideals and models; and under the tutelage of Balakirev, he composed, besides the Symphony, the Symphonic Picture, "Sadko," A Servian Fantasy, the Oriental Symphony, "Antar," and the opera, "The Maid of Pskov," known to us under the title of "Ivan the Terrible."

Although permitted to remain in the naval service he was appointed in 1871 to the post of professor of practical composition in the Petrograd Conservatoire, and there he, himself, learned the mastery of the technique which hitherto he had not had the opportunity of acquiring. The effect of his sea experience, however, shows itself in much of his work, and it is this actual contact with elemental nature, choral in moments of stress and violence, as well as in the gentler rhythmic moods—that we hear in “Sadko,” the opera as well as the fantasia. We feel as if we had been tossed and buffeted by the primal fury of the storm when the Sea King dances with savage abandon to the sound of Sadko’s *guslee*, as we are rendered breathless by the vehement realism of the shipwreck in “Scheherezade.”

After the death of Tchaikovsky in 1893 the Directorate of the Opera relied on Rimsky-Korsakov for the novelty of each season. In all he produced thirteen operatic works; of which none can be said to be a failure, and only one has been dropped from the repertory of the two Russian capitals and the provinces. Among these are “A Night in May,” “The Snow-Maiden,” perhaps the most graceful of his works, “Mlada,” “The Tsar’s Bride,” “Servilia,” “Pan Voyevode,” and “The Golden Cock.” The latter was produced the year preceding his death in 1908, and, it is said, the fact that it was not sanctioned by the censor during the composer’s lifetime, contributed, with other causes of vexation, to hasten the end.

The eminent critic and authority on Russian music and art, Rosa Newmarch, who lectured on Russian Opera in London at the time of its introduction there, has contributed this appraisal of Rimsky-Korsakov.*

*The Russian Opera, by Rosa Newmarch. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York.

A close study of the works of Rimsky-Korsakov reveals a distinguished musical personality; a thinker; a fastidious and exquisite craftsman; in a word—an artist of a refined and discriminating type who concerns himself very little with the demands and appreciation of the general public. Outside Russia he has been censured for his subservience to national influences, his exclusive devotion to a patriotic ideal. On the other hand, some Russian critics have accused him of introducing Wagnerism into national opera. This is only true in so far that he has grafted upon opera of the older, more melodic type the effective employment of some modern methods, more particularly the moderate use of the *leitmotif*. As regards orchestration, I have already claimed for him the fullest recognition. He has a remarkable faculty for the invention of new, brilliant, prismatic orchestral effects, and is a master in the skilful employment of onomatopoeia.

Those who assert, not entirely without reason, that Rimsky-Korsakov is not a melodist of copious and vivid inspiration must concede the variety, colour, independence and flashing wit of his accompaniments. This want of balance between the essential and accessory is certainly a characteristic of his music. Some of his songs and their accompaniments remind me of those sixteenth century portraits in which some slim, colourless, but distinguished Infanta is gowned in a robe of brocade rich enough to stand by itself, without the negative aid of the wearer.

Rimsky-Korsakov does not correspond to our stereotyped idea of the Russian temperament. He is not lacking in warmth of feeling, which kindles to passion in some of his songs but his moods of exaggerated emotion are very rare. His prevailing tones are bright and serene, and occasionally flushed with glowing colour. If he rarely shocks our hearts, as Moussorgsky does, into a poignant realization of darkness and despair, neither has he any of the hysterical tendency which sometimes detracts from the impressiveness of Tchaikovsky’s *cris de coeur*.

When a temperament, musically endowed, sees its object with the direct and observant vision of a painter, instead of dreaming it through a mist of subjective exaltation, we get a type of mind that naturally tends to a programme, more or less clearly defined. Rimsky-Korsakov belongs to this class. Labelled or not, we feel in all his music the desire to depict.

This representative of a school, reputed to be revolutionary, who has arrayed himself in the full panoply of musical erudition and scholarly restraint; this poet whose imagination revels in the folklore of Russia and the fantastic legends of the East; this professor who has written fugues and counterpoints by the dozen; this man who looked like an austere schoolmaster, and can on occasion startle us with an almost barbaric exuberance of colour and energy, offers, to my mind, one of the most fascinating analytical studies in all contemporary music.